

In Memoriam Ángel Sáenz-Badillos Pérez, 1940-2013

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Ángel Sáenz-Badillos Pérez was a preeminent scholar of Hispano-Hebrew literature and a contributor to *La corónica*. He was born in Logroño, Spain in 1940, and passed away on December 30, 2013, in Boston, near his home in Cambridge. He had an illustrious career as a philologist, Hebrew scholar, administrator, and teacher. His work spanned from Greek biblical studies to medieval Hebrew grammar and poetry to sixteenth-century Spanish Humanism. Readers of *La corónica* knew him for his contributions to this publication (Brann et al. 1998; Edwards et al. 1997), but within the field of Hispano-Hebrew he was, together with his partner Judit Targarona Borrás, one of the masters of the field. Together the two did so much to advance the study of the Hebrew literature of Spain that it is difficult to imagine what it would look like today without their interventions.¹

Sáenz-Badillos was trained as a Hellenic and Semitic philologist. His preparation was remarkable. He took four *licenciaturas* (Philology, Berchmannskolleg, Pullach bei München, 1964; Filosofía, Complutense 1969, Filología Bíblica Trilingüe, Complutense, 1970, and Teología, Pontificia Comillas-Madrid, 1970). For these degrees he completed undergraduate theses on Heidegger (*Hermeneútica* 1964), the *Quelle* gospel (*Estudio* 1969), and Samaritan Midrash (*El midrash* 1970). He completed his doctorate only three years later in 1972, in Filología Bíblica Trilingüe (Complutense), writing a dissertation on the polyglot bibles published in Spain in the sixteenth century (*Filología bíblica* 1973). Like the Biblical scholars and Humanists he studied, he carried Hebrew in his toolbox for scriptural studies. Scholars such as Antonio Nebrija, who is best known for his *Gramática de lengua española*, were also Greek and Hebrew scholars (Nebrija himself wrote several grammars of the Hebrew language). Before the age of Modern Language Studies and Judaic Studies, Hebrew was studied in Spain as a language of scripture.

Sáenz-Badillos was the consummate engaged philologist. His command of nearly every aspect of the field was admirable and included (at least) Semitic, Romance, and Greek philology, Hebrew paleography, poetics, literary criticism, literary history, social history of the Jewish communities of Iberia, and Biblical Studies. In 2014 we tend to think that a scholar so well versed in 'traditional' philology would be less concerned with the more 'cultural studies' type of work that

¹ I will not attempt a full accounting of Sáenz-Badillos' bibliography here, for which please refer to the introduction to the special volume of *Miscelánea de Estudios Árabes y Hebreos, Sección Hebreo* (Martínez Delgado and Cano Pérez).

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has come to overshadow manuscript studies and poetics in the US academy. But Sáenz-Badillos was, like others of his generation, a sensitive cultural critic who regularly, and without fanfare, included poignant and penetrating insights on the cultural history of Sephardic Jewry in his vast production of linguistic and poetic studies and translations.

There was a certain poetry to his intellectual trajectory. He began his career in Biblical studies working on the polyglot bibles edited by Spanish (Christian) Humanists. This led him to the study of grammarians in Spain, and in particular the study of Hebrew grammarians in Spain. Studying the work of these philologists led him, as it led them, from the Biblical to the philological to the poetic. Writers such as Dunash ibn Labrat (*Tešubot* 1980) and Menahem ibn Saruq (*Mahberet* 1986) sought to codify Biblical grammar just as their Muslim counterparts had codified Quranic usages. In so doing they were able to forge a Biblical Hebrew poetics modeled after the Arabic tradition, but enabling them to adapt Biblical Hebrew for their own poetic production (Sáenz-Badillos and Targarona Borrás, *Poetas hebreos* 1988; *Semu'el ha-Nagid. Poemas I* 1990; *Literatura hebrea en la España medieval* 1990; *El alma lastimada: Ibn Gabirol* 1992; Levin and Sáenz-Badillos, *Si me olvido de ti, Jerusalén* 1992; *Yehudah ha-Levi. Poemas* 1994; *Semu'el ha-Nagid. Poemas II* 1998; Sáenz-Badillos and Targarona Borrás, *Poesía hebrea en al-Andalus* 2003). He often wrote with a focus on the role that Jewish authors played in the broader context of the dominant culture ("Participación" 1996; *Judíos entre árabes* 2000; Carrete Parrondo et al., *Encuentros*.)

With the transition to Christian rule and Romance vernacularization in the Peninsula, Hebrew poets adapted to their new environment, always in dialogue the intellectual currents and aesthetic movements of the dominant culture (*Los judíos* 1980; "La poesía hebraicoespañola" 1997; Izquierdo Benito and Sáenz-Badillos, *La sociedad* 1998; "La sociedad" 1998; "Šelomoh Bonafed at the Crossroad" 2000). Toward the end of his career he published a number of articles that explored the intellectual culture of Jews and Conversos in the fifteenth century, thus closing the circle between the editors of the Spanish polyglots and the Andalusí grammarians who led the way for them ("Šelomoh Bonafed, último gran poeta" 2002; "Presencia" 2004; "Intelectuales" 2005). Humanism was, in a way, the alpha and omega of his scholarly trajectory.

Sáenz-Badillos guided the transformation of Hebrew studies in Spain in its journey from language of scriptural studies to one Spain's national linguistic traditions. He worked to bring this about without fanfare and without drawing attention to what he was doing. In his publications, in his teaching, and in his work as an administrator, he brought Hispano-Hebrew texts and authors to the center of Hebrew studies in Spain. This he did both by reassessing existing scholarship, but even more so by the less glamorous work of working with the widely scattered

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manuscript record, producing stable editions of Hispano-Hebrew texts, many of which had been inedited since the middle ages. Part of this humanistic mission was the series of translations he authored, co-authored and edited. Many of his students likewise went on to bring out editions and translations of Hispano-Hebrew writers who otherwise might never have been brought over into Spanish. The fact that much of his work, especially the many collaborations with Judit Targarona Borrás, consists of translations and reference works speaks to the extent to which they were committed to opening the literary worlds of Sefarad to non-specialists and general readers (*Diccionario* 1988; *Literatura hebrea* 1991; *History* 1993).

Professor Sáenz-Badillos advocated, quietly, gently, for the inclusion of Hebrew in Spanish literary history, and in general for a greater openness in assessing medieval cultural production in the Iberian Peninsula. This idea was a steady drumbeat that he sustained throughout his career. Already in 1980 he wrote:

los judíos que durante el Medioevo habitan en estas tierras son judíos y son andaluces, que entran de lleno en el acontecer de nuestra historia, y que de sus logros culturales, literarios y científico pueden sentirse depositarios y herederos al mismo tiempo el pueblo judío y el pueblo andaluz” (*Los judíos en la historia* 2)

A decade later, he continued to argue for the organic exchange of ideas and cultural practices between adherents of the Peninsula’s different religious traditions. For Sáenz-Badillos, Iberian Jews had the distinction of participating fully in the broader dominant culture while still maintaining a distinct cultural identity. They were able, he writes, to let themselves “enriquecer[se] por la cultura de los pueblos entre los que vivían, consiguiendo una notable síntesis de diversos elementos, con un sello genuinamente propio” (*Literatura hebrea* 5). He likewise argued consistently for the recognition of the artistic achievements of Hispano-Hebrew authors, arguing in one article that medieval Hispano-Hebrew poets such as Solomon ibn Gabirol and Samuel Hanagid Naghrela were in fact “a la altura de los mejores poetas del Medioevo” and writes of their “contribución al patrimonio común hispánico” (“La poesía hebraicoespañola” 405).

As a gentleman who by nature avoided open polemics, he did not hesitate to point up injustices—always with the utmost courtesy and grace—in the academy. In an essay on the history of Hispano-Hebrew studies, he calls certain unnamed colleagues to task for not embracing the full cultural (i.e. Christian and Romance-speaking) context of Hispano-Hebrew literature, calling for them to abandon a “perspectiva cargada de peso ideológico y nacionalista” (“El estudio” 1992, 139).

Sáenz-Badillos dedicated much of his career to the rehabilitation of the Hebrew poets of Christian Iberia. This corpus of work tends to be marginalized by

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scholars of Hispano-Hebrew poetry, who focus more on the achievements of the earlier Andalusí Hebrew canon (Solomon ibn Gabirol, Moshe ibn Ezra, Samuel Hanagid Naghrela, Judah Halevi). In a series of studies that intertwined closely with those of his partner Judit Targarona Borrás, he edited and interpreted the work of the 'Circle of Poets' of Zaragoza, who were active in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries ("Šelomoh Bonafed at the Crossroad" 2000; Šelomoh Bonafed, último gran poeta" 2002; "Creación poética" 2006). This was a period normally characterized by decline and persecution, the preamble to the expulsion at the close of the fifteenth century. But Sáenz-Badillos and Targarona Borrás exalted the poetry of the Zaragoza authors, rewriting literary history in two ways: on the one hand they shone a light on the poetic brilliance and productivity of a poetic scene completely overlooked by mainstream literary history and marginalized by specialists in their own field. Together with a number of other articles on the intellectual culture of Spain in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, this body of Sáenz-Badillos' work is of special importance to readers of *La corónica*; it represents Hebrew authors as partners in the literary ferment of vernacularization and emergent Humanism that characterized the late medieval period in the Iberian Peninsula.

The fact that Sáenz-Badillos often published his studies of Hispano-Hebrew literature in publications with broad readership in Hispanic or general literary studies is testament to his quiet but constant project to represent Hispano-Hebrew literature, and especially poetry, to the broader community of Humanists. He published articles in journals such as *Nueva Revista de Filología Hispánica* ("Notas" 1981), *Ariel* ("Hebrew Spanish Poets" 1992), and *Nueva Revista de Política, Cultura y Arte* ("Filología política" 1998).

It is difficult to do justice to the range, scope, depth, and sheer volume of Sáenz-Badillos' publications. He published at a rate that suggests a scholar who lead a life in retreat in his study. Nothing could be further from the truth. Sáenz-Badillos was, on the contrary, a social being who was warm, considerate, gentlemanly in a way that is no longer practiced, generous with his time, and socially engaged. In recent years he, together with his partner Judit Targarona Borrás, collaborated on a charitable non-profit in Granada, Nicaragua (www.casas-de-la-esperanza.org). How he managed to maintain the pace of productivity he did while leaving a legacy of students and colleagues who are unanimous in appreciation of his humanity and generosity (including of his time) is further testimony to his character and spirit. This humanity comes through clearly in his scholarship, in which he strove to link the formal with the social and the personal aspects of the writers and readers he studied. I would leave the reader with a short excerpt from the introduction to Sáenz-Badillos' revised doctoral dissertation that demonstrates his optimism and his genuine belief in the Humanities as an ethical project. At the dawn of the Renaissance, he writes:

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El individuo se hace consciente de su valor como persona, de su libertad en los mundos de la naturaleza y de la cultura, sobre los que establece su dominio. En reacción contra un pasado próximo poco brillante, acude a las fuentes antiguas en busca de un agua más pura y más vivificadora. Rompe las absurdas barreras políticas y temporales, así como la estrechez de miras de la especialización, y se convierte en ese hombre universal que se delita con la belleza y respira a pleno pulmón en el desarrollo más pleno de sus facultades. Frente a un sistema rígido y anquilosado de pensamiento, encuentra en la filología y en los modernos métodos positivos, no menos que en la observación directa de la naturaleza, nuevas vías de acceso a la verdad. (*La filología bíblica* 1990, 19)

Que descanse en paz, maestro.

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